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*Realism and Poetry on the Stage—  
Their Past and Their Future*

## MODERN PLAYWRITING AT THE CROSSROADS\*

BY JOHN GASSNER

THOMAS CARLYLE is supposed to have replied to a eulogy on a starry sky that it was "a sair nicht"—a sorry night, indeed. And I have neither the genius nor the dyspepsia of Carlyle to warrant obscuring the luster of the present occasion. Yet sobering considerations are never amiss when the subject is the present-day theatre; and thoughts out of season are in season when the subject is playwriting. There is, besides, a certain comfort in the impulse to criticize the stage. To criticize it is to acknowledge an interest in its con-

dition, and the theatre thrives on being noticed. Criticism is construed as a challenge, and the theatre likes to be challenged.

The theatre has been in a crisis for well over a decade, and in no respect has it been more disappointing than in the calibre of new plays. Like other contemporary writers, the playwright has been disoriented; but more than other writers, he has betrayed his disorientation because he works under extreme disadvantages. He must address a large public, which responds to his work very manifestly under the influence of the time spirit. He must also satisfy excessive requirements imposed, on the one hand, by the extravagant faith reposed in him—from sixty thousand to a hundred and twenty thousand dollars' worth of faith in the case of a Broadway production—and, on the other hand, by the extreme insecurity of theatrical production. Rarely, besides, does the playwright complete a final pre-production version without having followed extensive suggestions from his producer. Rarely does he rework his play during the rehearsal and try-out periods without

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pressure from the stage director. Many of the author's afterthoughts, moreover, simply cannot be incorporated in the playing-text because it is too late for his actors to discard old lines and learn new ones. Rarely, in other words, does the playwright enjoy conditions that would allow him to straighten out his thinking and artistry if he has not already mastered his confusions and ambivalences. And, finally, his play receives keener scrutiny, as a rule, than the work of the director and the actors, so that disorientation on his part can become a major disaster. Since critics are themselves members of the writing profession, they are in a position to find chinks in the playwright's armor, if not indeed bats in his belfry.

His situation in our time, however, goes well beyond the normal hazards of his craft. It is the condition of dramatic art at the mid-century point that is most relevant to the playwright's problem, once we grant that playwriting is always difficult and talent always rare. It is an error to assume that an art remains stable; that it presents the same opportunities and challenges in one period that it does in another. In the theatre, instability is particularly marked, and the incidence of diminishing returns for certain kinds of substance and style is extraordinarily high. It is entirely possible, for example, that the Eugene O'Neill of 1920 or the Clifford Odets of 1935 would have had a lukewarm reception in 1950. It is important, therefore, to arrive at perspectives on the over-all condition of playwriting at this time.

Instinctively or occupationally, all effective writers are aware of this fact to some degree. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, at the present time, have given serious thought to their problems as writers in an age of anxiety and failure, or as newcomers in the modern theatre, which by now has three-quarters of a century of trial and error behind it. As a rule, however, playwrights need to be made aware of the situa-

tion in their craft, because they tend to confuse a perspective with mere accommodation to fashion. The practical playwright is usually aware of current interests rather than of the broad stream of development in his art. And since the rise of realism in the nineteenth century, he has been peculiarly inclined to view his obligation as one of echoing popular interests. As a result, indeed, he succumbs to mediocrity to the degree that mediocrity is inherent in his subject. Alfred North Whitehead wrote that "Tennyson was a great poet with a mediocre subject"—namely, Victorian England. Playwrights often suffer the same fate. Those who write for the stage are surely more susceptible to the seductions of the moment than to a broad view of their situation.

I BELIEVE it is of the utmost importance for playwrights to realize that they are standing at the crossroads of modern drama. That is my first proposition! They are now called upon to choose one of two ways of writing for the stage—the way of the *reporter* and the way of the *creator*. And they must choose the latter if the stage is to survive the competition of the mass media, which has grown enormously and is likely to become even severer. Just as playwrights, especially in America, can no longer compete with routine farces and melodrama, now the stock in trade of the mass-communication media, so they can no longer compete against motion picture and television cameras with slices of life or facsimile reproductions of humdrum reality.

Nevertheless, the playwright hesitates at the crossroads. He does so, because the way of the reporter once proved satisfactory, or at least profitable, and was, moreover, equated with truthfulness and significance. At the same time, he is wary of flights into imaginative art because these have so often represented a retreat from reality, a rejection of popular theatre, or a sterile Bohemianism. More than he realizes, however,



JOHN GASSNER

*The Hopwood Lecturer for 1954 is an acknowledged authority on the drama; this portrait is after a photograph by G. Maillard Kesslere.*

his preference for so-called down-to-earth reportorial drama is the result of misconceptions. In writing conventionally, he confuses the drama of stencils with the dramatic realism that gave the theatre its modernity and claim to importance after 1880.

He fails to realize that the masters of realistic drama were creators of life *in the drama* rather than sedulous imitators of life *outside the theatre*. The modern masters shaped an experience out of the substance

of their passion and intellect, instead of setting up a camera in the streets or the family parlor and letting the camera click mechanically. The new playwright, especially in the American theatre, fails to distinguish sharply enough between an Ibsen or a Chekhov and any of the numerous mediocrities who have taken the name of realism in vain. Nor does he distinguish sufficiently between pseudo-poetic artificers and true poets of the theatre. He concludes from *avant-garde* aberrations by Cummings,

Cocteau, or Gertrude Stein that these represent the only alternatives to his kind of still-life or, shall I say, "dead-life," realism. He takes the *ersatz* article of pseudo-modernism at the valuation placed upon it by its exponents; whereupon he concludes that there are no satisfactory alternatives to the debased realism which passes for currency in show-business.

Conversely, *anti-realists*, reacting to pseudo-realism, have drawn their own erroneous conclusions. Too many of them, upon observing the commonplace stage, conclude that it is high time to swing from a flying trapeze and thumb noses at the bourgeoisie as a reliable method of creating a new dramatic art. They assume that anything that contravenes realism is *ipso facto* art, thus mistaking ambiguity for profundity and sensationalism for creative potency.

The situation is by no means new, of course. It could be observed in many respects during previous decades. What *is* new is the severity of the situation in our times, for today the novelty has worn off from both realism and anti-realism as technical or stylistic principles of dramatic composition. The so-called realistic playwright can no longer count on making an impression because he has provided an accurate picture. Nor can any anti-realistic playwright startle playgoers into delight merely because he has drawn everything topsy-turvy. The sensationalism of realism and the sensationalism of anti-realism are by now equally passé.

**M**ost important to the state of dramatic art, however, is not the fact that a playwright can no longer win success or esteem on factitious grounds of novelty, but the fact that certain factors that once gave impetus to his writing are no longer sufficiently operative.

I have in mind the need of some stimulus for writers who are obliged to affect a large congregated public. They must be energized

by aims and challenges, or perceptions and ideals other than the mere ambition to write plays for the market place. For direct public presentation, which is the essence of theatre, writers need a sense of relatedness. They develop best as significant playwrights when convinced that they are not creating in a vacuum. And for a vaulting mind and spirit, even the theatre considered as an autonomous institution *is essentially a vacuum*. "Theatre for theatre's sake" may serve not only as a flattering slogan for showmen, but as a deterrent to strictly utilitarian expectations from the stage. It has also been necessary to *re-theatricalize* the modern stage, which had been too grimly *de-theatricalized* by doctrinaire naturalism. But "theatre for theatre's sake" has never been able to nourish memorable playwriting. It has never been a substitute for a ruling passion and relatedness; as John Livingston Lowes declared, "the imagination never operates in a vacuum." A sense of extra-theatrical purpose is as marked in the work of an effective anti-realist like Bertolt Brecht as in the work of a great realist like Ibsen, as decisive in the comic genius of a Bernard Shaw as in the tragic sense of an O'Neill or an O'Casey. These playwrights believed with Mussorgsky that "Art is not an end in itself, but a means of addressing humanity." And it is, in my opinion, to the weakening of extra-theatrical purpose, to the loss of creative incentives mere show-business cannot provide, that we must attribute at least some of the flatness of contemporary playwriting.

Adventurousness was a major stimulus after 1880 in all the major theatres of the West because opinion was mainly rebellion against one convention or another. And when rebellion was not an efficient cause, the spirit of criticism was. The modern drama was born in rebellion and cradled in criticism. Intelligence, vigor, and vivacity were attendant upon this modern adventure and were its dramatic and esthetic correlates. They were especially attendant upon this

adventure in the case of dramatic realism. Along with personal qualities of style and personal qualities of mind, the spirit of inquiry provided the esthetic attributes of the work, whether the author's appraisals of his world were as direct as Ibsen's or as indirect as Chekhov's. One reason why pioneering modern realism was not flaccid, as most realistic plays have been since the nineteen-forties, is that it was critical realism.

The critical spirit led to adventurousness in dramatic art itself. Personal passion led to individual style rather than routinized prose. And the need for making a special view apparent led to the adoption of dramatic structure that carried realistic dramaturgy well beyond the mere adoption of the fourth-wall convention of pretending that actions transpire on the stage exactly as they do off-stage without an audience.

Citing only familiar examples, I would recall the highly individual style and form of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, and O'Casey. To note the distinctiveness of the work we need only observe Ibsen's development of a retrospective, stock-taking, discussion-pyramided type of drama which first appeared in *A Doll's House* and culminated in *John Gabriel Borkman*; or Strindberg's intense concentration on crisis to the exclusion of other elements of plot in such plays as *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *The Creditor*, and that gripping divorce-drama *The Link*; or Chekhov's contrapuntal and off-center, centrifugal weave of action; or Shaw's dialectical brilliance in melodrama, farce, and comedy of ideas; or O'Casey's lyrical pathos and mordancy. Nor did such distinctive realists lose a distinctive style when they chose to abandon the realistic technique. They were still bent upon having their say in their own manner when Ibsen adopted symbolism, when Strindberg turned to expressionism, or when Shaw wrote *Heartbreak House* as a "fantasia in the Russian manner," to cite his own subtitle.

Associated with critical realism were, of course, other factors than the adventure of opinion. One of these was the sheer pleasure of intellectualism, most conspicuously in Shaw's writing; for intellect was once considered a distinction rather than a detriment, say I nostalgically! A playwright was expected to have a mind, and he gloried in its possession. Another factor was principle, or the belief that a playwright could not be modern unless he possessed integrity. He could not be modern if he moderated or vulgarized reality for the sake of approval—which explains the critic Shaw's contemptuous description of the pseudo-Ibsenist Pinero as a playwright who had no idea "beyond that of doing something daring and bringing down the house by running away from the consequences." Not surprisingly, then, the true modernist, in the theatre between 1880 and 1939, usually had his pioneering work produced by experimental stage groups. In Europe, moreover, such work was less taxed by the requirement of serving commercial enterprise because the play appeared in repertory, whereas nowadays, especially on Broadway, a play that does not win immediate success is quickly laid in lavender. If a play does not promise popular success in our high-cost theatre, the work is either tailored to suit the market or denied a professional stage production. Only recently, within the past two or three years, has there been a slight swing away from the commodity-philosophy of play production. Yet laudable as have been off-Broadway enterprises at a Circle-in-the-Square or a Theatre de Lys in New York, they are still no substitute for the repertory system. Nor are these groups sparked by that dedication to the development of a dramatic movement relevant alike to art and society which inspired the Théâtre Libre, the Abbey Theatre, the Art Theatre in Moscow, the Provincetown Players in New York.

A sense of discovery was also a powerful ferment of dramatic modernism, whether

discovery took the form of naturalistic scientism and sociology, now properly outmoded, or psychological exploration, such as Strindberg and Wedekind undertook. Nor should we slight the efforts of playwrights to discover the common earth and the common man. The discovery of unfashionable life for the theatre gave us the plays of Synge and O'Casey, Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* and Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, and the first plays of O'Neill and Odets—to mention familiar instances.

Finally, the playwrights were likely to benefit from the stimulus of visionary optimism. They had an active faith in man, however greatly scientific determinism tended to reduce man's tragic stature. Without that faith there would have been little point in Ibsen's or Shaw's prodding or haranguing him, or in exposing his frustrations in a particular society.

It may be argued that the pioneering playwrights were deluded; that they suffered from the fallacy and pathos of modern liberalism. It cannot be denied, however, that they derived purposefulness, passion, and even exuberance from their faith. Believers in progress may become the dupes, even the victims, of progress, but confidence and a sense of engagement are anything but deterrents to dramatic vigor. Can one doubt this conclusion after comparing the difference in voltage between Odets' early and late plays, or between the plays Shaw wrote before 1914 and those he wrote after 1930?

**T**ODAY, playwriting is too rarely galvanized by many factors that once gave realism its incisiveness, resolve, and vitality. The Ibsenism of Arthur Miller proves that these qualities are not unattainable even today, and playwriting was somewhat energized in France, England, and America during the Second World War. But, in general, opinion has lacked fervor; and criticism, edge. Inquiry and exploration have been rare and affirmations few, in the contemporary theatre. We have had, in the

main, a tepid, if not indeed pusillanimous, stage. Even the occasional scintillations of comedy have too often occurred in a vacuum. Character has been infrequently probed. Realism has been expended mainly upon surface-manifestations. Even negations, except in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, have been mild and circumspect.

That a disenchantment pervasive in our world should have affected playwrights is hardly surprising. It is understandable, too, that in view of the contemporary situation, playwrights are now wary of social prescriptions that had been popular in the theatre of the nineteen-thirties. One does not expect writers to *will* themselves into believing untenable postulates for man or society. But I see them as writers who are immobilized at the crossroads of modern theatre because they have not yet learned to make anything out of their *disbelief*.

Their disenchantment has no substantiality; it is mute, rather than expressive. Without trying to account for current apathy, I venture to describe their condition as intellectual sloth, as hesitancy to let the mind or spirit assert itself even in disenchantment. It may be that the alternative to the old critical realism sparked by optimism is a new critical realism sparked by disillusion. As yet, however, playwrights, especially in the American theatre, have shown little aptitude for this second kind of realism.

Since Western theatre is now eclectic, our playwrights can, of course, elect a non-realistic style of theatre, as an alternative. They can even elect dramatic estheticism without necessarily disintegrating the modern stage. The test, however, will be the same as for realism—namely, achievement.

Nihilism or disintegration, it is true, became pronounced in nonrealistic dramaturgy during and after the First World War. It became marked in the case of the expressionists, dadaists, and surrealists. Ranging from the cult of symbolism, which can be traced as far back as the 1890's, to

the cult of frenzy that had a brief vogue on the European continent after 1914, anti-realism proved largely arid only at this latter end of the spectrum. Estheticism maintained at least a belief and an adventurousness in art, besides correcting the excesses of naturalism. Dedication to art is considerably more fruitful than the dedication to precisely nothing which characterizes the commercial stage in our time. An "art for art's sake" policy, if carried to logical conclusions, may be a sign of decadence, but estheticism has its own assertiveness, too. It demands integrity from the artist, requiring him to respect his sensibility and to attain a high degree of artistry in the service of style and form. The pursuit of art for art's sake has obvious limitations but can be in some respects affirmative and humanistic. The esthetic movement, too, left a legacy to playwrights of the present generation. That it can still be drawn upon is especially attested in our theatre by the estheticism of Tennessee Williams.

Moreover, there is no reason to assume that estheticism cannot draw upon the resources of modern realism even while discarding realistic dramaturgy and peephole stage conventions. The vital elements of realism remained in force, for example, when the late Jean Giraudoux wrote plays infused with critical intelligence. There is no essential conflict between the aims of modern realism and of poetic extravaganza in, let us say, *The Madwoman of Chaillot* any more than there was essential conflict between the realism of *Ghosts* and that of *Man and Superman*, including its *Don Juan in Hell* fantasy. The same intellectual strenuousness is present equally in Strindberg's late expressionist and early naturalistic dramas. Nor has there been anything but strenuous intellectualism in such anti-nationalist plays of Bertolt Brecht as *The Three-Penny Opera*, *Mother Courage*, and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. There is no intrinsic incompatibility between adventurousness in the domain of opinion and ad-

venturousness in the domain of art. If such incompatibility has often manifested itself, it has been occasioned by the ineptitude of would-be realists and the vacuousness of would-be esthetes.

If playwrights, especially in America, seem incapable of availing themselves of the possibilities inherent in modern nonrealistic art, the reason is twofold. On the one hand, faith in art as a sufficient goal in the theatre is at a low ebb, and has been that, indeed, ever since the social idealism of the thirties discredited an "art for art's sake" viewpoint. On the other hand, the infusion of nonrealistic dramaturgy with the critical spirit never made much headway in the American theatre after the twenties. Today, moreover, the critical spirit is so enervated that it does not invigorate nonrealistic drama any more than it invigorates realistic drama. Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real*, the most recent American experiment in the symbolist-expressionist style, was as embarrassingly callow in its thinking as in its literary effusiveness. If British poetic drama, as written by Eliot and Fry, cannot be charged with callowness, it is not exempt from another charge—that of sterility. I would make a grudging exception only in favor of *The Cocktail Party* and *The Lady's Not for Burning*. Strong claims have been made for the work of Jean Anouilh in France, but as yet I cannot validate them myself, and I doubt that posterity will. In no country's theatre, now that Giraudoux has been dead for a decade and Brecht is isolated behind the Iron Curtain like a chaffinch in a cage, can I discern any dramatic stylization distinguished by vitality.

MODERN playwriting, then, is enfeebled today because neither the realistic nor the esthetic legacy retains its pristine potency. Both styles of modern theatre have suffered much deterioration from within—realism because it became too commonplace, estheticism because it became too empty and pretentious. The failings of each mode of

modernism were inherent in the mode, as we can observe in assessing the dry texture of Ibsen's realistic plays and the vaporous quality of Maeterlinck's symbolist efforts. In many instances, their successors merely exaggerated the faults—latter-day realists increasing the commonplaceness, while latter-day anti-realists increased the vapor. The contemporary social and political situation plagues playwriting today, making it placid and evasive or superficial, but its deficiencies and defects have been intrinsic to modern dramatic art itself. Inherited tendencies exact their toll, and the past must share the blame for present failure. Bad example stalemated realism and discredited estheticism.

Specifically, we must observe this about the realistic mode of modern drama—that realistic writing became too largely the writing of problem plays, transforming the theatre into a reformatory; or became the writing of propaganda plays, converting the stage into a soap-box; or became the writing of nondescript pieces of description, turning theatrical art into a placid mirror in which the public could see itself making usually unimpressive faces. Today, neither subtlety nor wit, neither incisiveness nor profundity, neither originality nor any other sort of transcendence of the obvious characterizes all but a minute fraction of the once-impressive realistic theatre. During the Broadway season now coming to an end only two exceptions could be noted, *The Caine Mutiny* and *Tea and Sympathy*, and this has been considered an exceptionally good season. Moreover, the first-mentioned play was extracted from a novel.

Specifically, too, we may observe this about the nonrealistic modern theatre—that it has too often compounded confusion and whipped-up froth. Expressionism and surrealism discredited themselves with their excesses. Poetic drama has too often been willed into existence or academically pursued in the modern theatre, except when distilled from folklore in exotic regions.

And folk-life has become a diminishing source of poetry on our contracting planet. Poetry as *tour de force* verse drama, gratifying in a few Christopher Fry plays, gives no evidence of a tuneful summer. Nor has formalism recommended itself as a modern style, so that its ablest recent proponent, T. S. Eliot, has himself increasingly abandoned it since the writing of *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935; and the formalism of William Butler Yeats's fine latter-day plays, patterned after Japanese drama, amounted to an almost complete withdrawal from the public theatre. An esoteric drama for the élite has never before contributed greatly to a renascence of playwriting.

Estheticism, despite the noteworthy contributions of a Gordon Craig or Jacques Copeau to the theatre arts, did not give sufficient sustenance to playwriting, and is even less likely to do so at present. A success of theatrical art or so-called *coup de théâtre* by, let us say, the Habimah Theatre of Israel or the Jean-Louis Barrault Company of Paris is one thing; the creation of potent modern drama is another. The Old Vic or the Stratford Company, gifted in the art of stylization, may provide a glossy or even excellent production of Shakespeare, but does not give the modern stage another Shakespeare; not even another Ben Jonson, Ibsen, or Shaw. And in previous decades, a virtuoso director such as Meyerhold may have brought forth prodigious feats of staging without bringing forth a single prodigy of playwriting.

Standing between seedy realism and motley theatricalism, the contemporary playwright is likely to be cross-ventilated to no particular benefit to his art or his public; especially in the American professional theatre where the unstimulating realistic play usually expires on the boards and the stylized play rarely reaches them. Nodding in the direction of debased realism, an Elmer Rice has both an artistic and financial fiasco with *The Winner* or with an

earlier problem play such as *A New Life*. And gazing in the opposite direction of turgid, symbolic estheticism, a Tennessee Williams bravely runs into a fog with a *Camino Real*.

WHERE then may the playwright, whose plight is not entirely alien to his colleagues in fiction and nondramatic poetry, take his stand? I cannot adopt a Pisgah-view in order to direct the new playwright toward some Promised Land. But it may be neither impossible nor impertinent to direct his gaze toward possibilities suggested by past experience and present exigency. I would suggest therefore that the playwright consider the following possibilities of breaking his present impasse:

Let him pursue the way of realism, if he inclines in that direction; but let him reject photography. Let his *perception* and *apprehension* be realistic. Whether he adopts the method of direct assault upon reality or some indirect Chekhovian method, he is entirely free to avail himself of an imaginative presentation. Without such presentation, *The Glass Menagerie* would have been tenuous and the current season's *Teahouse of the August Moon* either pointless or inert. Without the modified expressionism Arthur Miller mingled with realism, *Death of a Salesman* would have been humdrum, especially in view of the representative commonplaceness of his Willy Loman.

A contemporary playwright's art does not have to be humdrum because his characters lack brilliance or some other unusual attribute. His imagination should be able to give them dimension and stature; he should not shy away from suffering and exultation but remember that only commonplace people dislike tragedy, because as Masefield said, "they dare not suffer and cannot exult." Moreover, imaginative form can transfigure subject matter. The *form* can be poetic. And, especially on stage, the playwright can bring into being a "poetry

of the theatre" in the organization or sequence, shape, and highlighting of the episodes of a play. Treadmill playwriting—that is, walking the treadmills of an ordinary time-sequence and routine exposition—is unnecessary. It can actually prove detrimental to the higher realism of exposing the truth.

Poetry can also be achieved in realistic drama by attention to nuance and to atmosphere and mood. Too many plays are written today without sensibility, too many without a dominant feeling or feeling-tone in individual scenes and in the play as a whole. Also, insufficient stress is placed on variety of scene within the unity of the play. Action is shown under a glare of white light, without any concern for chiaroscuro. Language, too, is susceptible to enrichment and intensification without violence to artistic, as opposed to phonographic, plausibility. Both colloquial and formal dialogue can be cadenced and accentuated; and it can be enriched with rhythm and imagery without our resorting to reminiscent patterns or literary echoes.

Realism does not need to be cravenly imitative in portrayal and description. It can even be discreetly symbolic and suggestive, as such veteran realists as Ibsen and Chekhov teach us in, let us say, *The Wild Duck*, *The Sea Gull*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Nor do ideas have to be argued with a "massive retaliation" technique. They can be parceled out and orchestrated, or counterpointed.

The play of ideas should *play* rather than bombard. It is conceivable that the bankruptcy of ideas or of so-called seriousness in the theatre has been, to a degree, a bankruptcy of method, which began when intellect became confused with the vending of specific solutions. That the solutions have not worked out very well is no reason why the intellect must abdicate from the theatre. Nor is there any reason to seek the tether of uncritical traditionalism, by prescript from Eliot or anyone else. Because the

freedom of modernism led the playwright, as well as his fellow-citizens, into error is no reason for replacing inquiry with dogma. It would be better to reflect that in so far as realism erred egregiously in opinion, it did so because it became dogmatic rather than critical, prescriptive rather than exploratory.

Finally, if the playwright is so inclined, he may endeavor to write poetic drama, whether formally in prose or verse. There may well be a future for poetic drama, if it serves to illuminate modern life rather than to obscure it with windy exclamations or obscurantist metaphysics. The poet, besides, needs a sterner discipline than he has generally had in view while working for the modern theatre. He should not rely on blank verse, for example, but on an idiom and meter attuned to contemporary speech. Nor should he mistake ornate rhetoric for dramatic poetry. The late critic Percy Hammond warned old-fashioned musical-comedy purveyors of high-kicking chorus girls that a knee was a joint and not an ornament. We may adapt this warning to poets who flourish and trumpet their poetry, although they need not go as far as does T. S. Eliot today in *concealing* it. For the contemporary theatre to be redeemed by poetry, dramatic conception must determine poetic expression. And there is little sense,

of course, in inviting contemporary poets into the theatre unless they learn to communicate content without the help of exegesis, for which there is no time during a performance. The poet must become a dramatist if we are to have a sound alternative to dramatic realism. And in order to be meaningful to our stage, let him condescend to our common world a little. In aiming at universality, he should not rule out contemporary realities and become merely "historical." Lowes wisely declared that "there is nothing new that was not old." I believe it is necessary only to penetrate surfaces, even ordinary surfaces, in order to attain universality.

In conclusion, however, I realize that the future of both realism and poetry depends upon developments a critic can recommend but cannot ensure. Perhaps it would be best on this, as on other occasions, to let Bernard Shaw have the last word. "From time to time," Shaw wrote, "dramatic art gets a germinal impulse. There follows in the theatre a spring which flourishes into a glorious summer. This becomes stale almost before its arrival is generally recognized; and the sequel is not a new golden age, but a barren winter that may last any time from fifteen years to a hundred and fifty. Then comes a new impulse; and the cycle begins again." Let us hope that it will begin soon.